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ABSTRACT

Current research and treatment methods view test anxiety as the student's problem. The author challenges the prevailing view and describes test anxiety not only as the student's psychological problem, but also as one result of the university's struggle to maintain power over the students. Consulting with faculty, acting as student advocates, and publicly affirming research findings are discussed as preventive or developmental counseling strategies, and are viewed as means of liberating student growth and learning. (Author/MV)

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# The Politics of Test Anxiety

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Abstract

Anxiety which interferes with a student's performance on examinations has been called test anxiety. Current research and treatment methods emphasize that Test Anxiety is a student owned problem. This study challenges the prevailing view and describes Test Anxiety as a symptom of a political struggle for power within the university. University counseling centers providing remedial or treatment approaches are described as contributors to the oppression of students. Consulting with faculty, acting as student advocates, and publically affirming research findings are discussed as preventive or developmental counseling strategies and are viewed as liberating student growth and learning.

# The Politics of Test Anxiety

*I saw a small group of students from my class talking together outside of the room where in a few minutes we were going to take our final exam. I didn't want to join them for fear they would be talking about something that I didn't study. It really made me anxious seeing them talking.*

*It couldn't have been more than two minutes after the test questions were handed out when I looked around and saw everybody else rapidly writing; I hadn't even figured out the question yet. I started to freak out.*

*One night during final exam period I was at the undergraduate library studying and there were these long rows of literally hundreds of other pople studying, you know, people with big stacks of books, lots of notes. I was really getting tense. Suddenly this guy jumps up on the study table and yells, "Stop! Stop! Your're all getting ahead of me."*

*I was so scared I wasn't going to do well on the exam; it wasn't so much that I wanted good grades, it's just that I was terrified of doing poorly. I know it was wrong, but I looked at some notes in my purse. I just didn't trust my memory. Wow, I couldn't believe it, here I was trading my morals for a lousy exam.*

Anxiety during examination time in universities is a common experience among students. Sometimes they doubt they are adequately prepared or believe they're going to flunk the exam. While many students have come to accept anxiety as a part of higher education, theoretical and laboratory studies have identified the concept of test anxiety as a significant psychological problem at the college level. A high level of test anxiety seriously interferes with a student's performance capabilities. Students often report cognitive problems such as blanking out, having reading difficulties, freezing up, recalling important points too late; or physical problems such as insomnia, hypertension, vomiting; or behavior changes such as drug use, increased smoking, weight gains, irritability, arguments, or cheating. Recognizing that some students may not be fully demonstrating their potentials and abilities because they are debilitated by test anxiety, university counselors have developed methods of treatment which provide the test anxious person with particular coping skills that are designed to reduce anxiety under conditions of evaluative stress.

The purpose of this paper is to present the view that test anxiety is more complex and pervasive than present research would lead one to believe. It represents not only a psychological problem, but also a political problem. While ostensibly serving a variety of purposes testing and evaluation techniques in university settings are basically methods for allocating power and governing students. In addition, university counseling centers which provide services to treat test anxiety in students generally magnify the problem by contributing to the political support of unwritten institutional goals rather than changing the policies which created the problem.

When a student has difficulty studying and/or becomes anxious around examinations to the extent that performance is handicapped, the conventional wisdom of education would conclude that the student needs to study harder or better, turn on to anxiety management counseling, drop out, or change the institutional (faculty) approach to evaluation. Of these alternatives, a university usually provides services for the first three options, but rarely will assist a student to change the system. However, it is unlikely that many students would presently select the change - the - faculty option. By focusing on test anxiety as a psychological problem, counselors pay too much attention to the presenting symptoms and ignore anxiety as a political experience. Sidney Jourard (1975) described this focus as the fallacy of symptoms, that is, the counselor fails to look beyond the symptoms to the situations that generated them. Counselors have been trained to use tests and generally have respect for testing, so when a student appears who doesn't enjoy tests and reports feeling anxious thinking about or taking tests, counselors conclude the student needs reorientation or some type of treatment. A recent scientific experiment may prove illustrative: Several scientists were working to train fleas to respond to vocal commands. When they asked the fleas to fly, the fleas would fly; when they asked the fleas to flit, the fleas would flit around. Then they wondered what the flea's reaction to the commands would be if they removed the flea's wings. Now, when they asked the fleas to fly, the fleas just stayed in the same place and when they asked the trained fleas to flit around, the fleas did not move. The scientists concluded that when the wings are removed from fleas, the fleas become deaf. Because a student does better on examinations after personal

counseling, the counselor concludes the source of the problem has been eliminated. Probably a more precise term for test anxiety would be evaluation distress which would indicate the student is responding to a stress producing evaluation. This may enable counselors to feel less defensive about tests and testing and more interested in understanding the context of the evaluation.

Anxiety, stemming from the Latin, anxietas, means uncertainty, agitation or dread, and as John Wood (1976) has pointed out, anxiety also means strangulation. Students have little control over their evaluation and do not experience any certainty as to how performance will be assessed. What often is called anxiety is really the feeling of powerlessness--the feeling that students cannot direct their own lives and maintain worth and dignity. Students will often accept the values of their teachers, simply because of the balance of power. Professors strengthen this topdog pattern by getting students to believe in the professor's values. This makes wielding power easier and limits the student's willingness to protest against the professorial values. The students wind up feeling responsible and guilty for their own condition. Fritz Perls once stated that guilt was primarily a form of resentment. The student is unable to express the resentment and is afraid that his feelings will be uncovered and the professor will consider him unworthy. Fearing judgment, rejection and humiliation, the student becomes anxious and fearful. This anxiety becomes particularly strong when the power needs of students and faculty are at the interface: during evaluation periods. Eric Fromm (1966) described the experience this way:

> When (students) try to act responsibly and when they are prevented from applying authentic thinking, they experience frustration and anguish and they work to restore their capacity to act. But can they and how? One way is to submit to and identify with a person or a group having power. By this symbolic participation in another person's life,

(students) have the illusion of acting, when in reality (they) only submit to and become a part of those who act. (p. 31)

The following dialogue is an example of two persons negotiating for power in a typically disguised fashion:

| What they say: | | What they mean: |
|---|---|---|
| These are the basic requirements for this class. | Professor | Be a good student, and do what I tell you. |
| Two mid-terms, a paper and a final are too much. | Student | I won't do it. I know ineffective evaluation when I see it. |
| It's the best method because it gives you more opportunities to prove yourself. | Professor | I'm older and more experienced. What I tell you to do is in your best interest. |
| Can we vote on it? | Student | I will choose my own evaluation method. |
| We're not here to judge methods of evaluation, you're here to learn about interpersonal relations. | Professor | I like students who do as I tell them. I'll withdraw my positive evaluation of you if you are not dependent on me. |

Students generally will not risk their institutional survival. As Maslow has elegantly pointed out, survival needs must be met, before actualizing needs can be achieved. Evaluation, or feedback as it is often called, is generally desired and sought out by students, but students have

little power to insure that the evaluations are accomplished at a level acceptable to them. Several aspects of traditional faculty authority interfere with a student's ability to receive a valued evaluation. Given a historical and continuing practice of teaching independence, faculty members often develop conflicting criteria for acceptable performance. One faculty member values quickness of response while another cherishes accuracy. Working to deadlines or insuring adequacy of work can be conflicting values also experienced by students. Additionally, faculty members generally set course standards and assign degrees of importance to them. This generally results in evaluation activities not only being out of the student's control, but also may result in making performance unattainable if the standards are set unrealistically high, or meaningless if they are set too low. Unclear and abstract evaluation criteria can also contribute to a student's anxiety. Ironically, many faculty members who are unconcerned about evaluation either from a "do-your-own-thing" freedom perspective or from a not enough time to deal with it perspective leave students feeling anxious about the evaluation mainly because the students cannot predict how they will be assessed.

At the same time, it is essential that students be able to differentiate between that which they can do something about and that which they can do nothing about; this distinction is essential for growth. But virtually all aspects of educational institutions are set up to present the illusion that students can do nothing (appeal committees are made up of faculty members, administrators control grade and examination patterns) and the student is deceived into thinking that he/she is not

being oppressed by others, but that the problem is really his/her own fault. Faculty often rely on what has been termed the Just World Theory which explains how victims are blamed for their own misfortunes. The individual (alcoholic, doper, poor person, or in the present case, anxious student) is seen as entirely responsible for the situation in which he or she find themselves, therefore the onlooker (faculty member) has no obligation to act; this perspective enables faculty members to feel more secure and less inclined towards self-examination. The distribution of power, or the allocation of delusion as Castaneda's Don Juan might say, is the heart of test anxiety as a socio-political rather than psychological problem. Using Eric Berne's (1972) perspective, test anxiety becomes the testing "racket". Students who experience evaluation anxiety can identify the contexts within which the anxiety occurs, but they are generally unaware of the source of the anxiety, preferring to believe there is something wrong with themselves. To identify anxiety as a result of helplessness in a power struggle would create a conflict with survival needs.

Counseling centers on university campuses often contribute to this phenomenon by emphasizing that it is the student's problem, and that since tests are a way of life in Western countries, students <u>should</u> learn to control their anxiety. Indeed, anxiety management techniques have been developed which are very effective in decreasing "test anxiety". Remedial programs in reading and study skills or anxiety control, however, do little to change the <u>increasing</u> number of students who experience these difficulties. One promising note is the advent of <u>self-control</u> behavioral techniques, where the student can operate independently of the counselor (Deffenbacher & Snyder, 1976; Goldfried & Merbaum, 1973;

Goldfried, 1972; Meichenbaum, 1972; Watson & Tharp, 1972). However, these techniques focus on students modifying or changing their own behaviors and in the main do not provide students with skills to modify their environment so that it will be more congruent with their needs. Giving the student this self control power does not change the distribution of power, it only hopes to give the student his share of better grades, and calms him from challenging the system that exploits him. The more easily students can be made to adapt to a situation, the more easily they can be dominated. Self-control techniques might be effective if they had a high generalization capability, that is, they could be employed in a wide variety of evaluative situations and as Deffenbacher (1976) says would "increase (a student's) degrees of freedom and neutralize stress". However, there is virtually no research which demonstrates the generalizability of anxiety management techniques to other evaluative situations. This is not because the techniques don't work, it's because the techniques focus on the wrong target. Behaviorally oriented therapists have been criticized for dealing with symptoms only, implying that the underlying problem remains and new symptoms will develop. However, the view being presented here is not that new symptoms will substitute for previous ones, but that the therapists are (a) providing the wrong skills and (b) are working with the wrong clients. As Paolo Friere (1970) has pointed out, "the solution is not to integrate them (the students) into the structure; but to transform that structure so that they can become beings for themselves", (p. 61).

Given the perspective I have been describing, then why don't more (or all) students experience test anxiety? I would estimate that almost everyone who takes tests experiences anxiety, but few persons are willing to bring it out in the open. Expressing feelings is not generally accepted or valued in academic settings. Alan Paton (1967) put it this way:

> I am searching for an explanation for the fact that under some circumstances men readily admit fear and other circumstances do not. I assume that readiness to admit fear is part of a general readiness to look at the world as it is and therefore at oneself as one is, while unwillingness to admit fear may be a strong element in self-esteem. One does not readily admit to a fear of which one is ashamed. (p. 20)

In addition students are too busy preparing and taking tests to do anything about the evaluation system. As my neighbor told me, I'm too busy chasing stray cows to fix the fences. Grade competition may actually weaken students by isolating them from each other, by creating and deepening conflicts among them. Students may be anesthetized by their own immaturity, yielding their power to the technology of evaluation. In One Dimensional Man (1964) Herbert Marcuse describes the increased use of science and technology as instruments of power serving to preserve order through manipulation and oppression.

Feelings which threaten the orderliness or smooth functioning of the institution may not be encouraged by university counselors. Counselors associated with educational establishments have a realistic stake in seeing the school function without incident. They are often asked to provide services for students who are disruptive, have personality problems, or who don't fit in with the ongoing practices of the school (value clash) and get low-grades that threaten an orderly flow towards graduation. Ironically potential drop-outs or "professional" students are considered a problem for administrative reasons since they interfere with expected progress; remedial and corrective programs are developed, ostensibly, to help students (and counselors), but have the effect of preventing system change. How often do counselors work with students to change faculty/administrative policies and practices? How often do counselors respond to students' anxiety as though it was a signal of environmental distress? My squash partner, George Durand,

described the evaluation system as comparable to a guillotine with the counselor's role being directed at toughening the student's neck or changing the student's perception of the blade from steel to jello. Eventually the blade falls: it may only pierce halfway through the outstretched neck or more likely the student won't know his head has been lopped off.

Counselors, although extensively trained in human learning and development, are usually disengaged from the academic policies and practices of educational settings. They have little impact on the instructional program at a university, and are generally uninvolved in any attempts to change environmental conditions. And while they may perceive their major responsibility as working to assist particular students, their overall responsibility must be to all participants in the educational community. This conflict in responsibility often leads counselors to work with a small number of individuals in remedial, corrective or prescriptive ways only. It would seem a narrow perspective, indeed, if physicians only gave information about diagnosis and etiology of breast cancer to those women who already had cancer; or for the Surgeon General to withhold information on the role cigarettes or other external substances play in cancer. More comprehensive interaction such as preventive and developmental approaches which involve the entire university population are necessary and many counseling centers have shifted their remedial emphasis in an attempt to provide a more effective service. Rather than working with each individual student to decrease anxiety, counselors can work with faculty to assist them to develop learning conditions which are effective and have impact on a greater number of students than an individual counselor could possibly

manage. Present treatment approaches in counseling centers prolong and contribute to student problems, and the counselors focus on repairing damage only serves to decrease student awareness of the exploitive and damaging context of their environment

Counselors working at a preventive level of intervention generally approach problems in a larger, more long-term perspective, despite the seductiveness of immediate visible direct service techniques. They perceive their responsibility to all students and focus in-depth on the causes of student problems extending their services to students whose concerns are developmental and often not directly visible. Often called outreach counseling (Morrill & Oetting, 1970; Drum & Figler, 1973), preventive counseling directs its efforts towards working with the entire institution, faculty administration and students. An orthopedic surgeon may appreciate having his office filled with clients who are victims of automobile accidents, but eventually he may want to have an impact on auto safety standards, engine size, motor vehicle testing and manufacturing. Similarily when a university counseling center appointment calendar increases around examination periods and the counselors spend their time working only with students, they ignore their responsibility to study the conditions which produce the anxiety, panic and distress. And most significantly they fail to have an impact on university policies which might prevent the noxious environmental factors. Counselors who perceive their target client as the institution risk encountering administrative or faculty censure, which would severly threaten the existence (and expansion) of university counseling services. The methods used by preventive

counselors are often indirect (Carr, 1976) and focus on consulting (Dinkmeyer, 1974) and research (Sashkin, 1974) in order to facilitate growth of all students. And while prevention focuses on strengthening a student's ability to resist harmful stress, it also works to reduce distress producing factors in the environment. University counseling centers with spiraling case loads and long waiting lists often cannot see the environment as partially responsible for their clients coming to them. Preventive counselors hope to reduce the direct service spiral by developing environments which prevent problems. In the long run Harper and Balch (1975) found that preventive services are less costly than treatment services.

Recently I conducted a survey on two university campuses to discover the extent, methods of and reasons for students cheating on examinations. While the methods appeared to be generally similar to those I observed or heard about during my undergraduate days, the number of students engaged in these stress related activities surprised me. On the larger campus (25,000 students) 47% of the sample reported they had engaged in some form of activity they considered cheating, and similar results were reported by students on the smaller campus. I am hesitant to submit these results to the universities involved, for if they are like my present employer they will want to strengthen the penalties for cheating and send memos to faculty members to increase their vigilance, rather than examine the competitiveness, pressures and evaluation methods and grading policies which contribute to the problem. Another finding of the survey was that approximately 80% of the sample had seen or known of specific instances of other students cheating, but believed it was not up to them to say or do anything about it. One explanation for this is that students

are experiencing a common bond under the pressure of evaluative oppression. They empathize with each other and often see cheating as a justified means to attain lost power. Students may indirectly be learning greater compassion and tolerance for behaviors different from their own.

Whether anxiety helps or hinders total academic growth is unsettled. Counselors have seen both positive and negative outcomes from anxiety. Deffenbacher (1976) reports that certain levels of anxiety may be helpful to student performance. May (1953), Frankl (1969), Mowrer (1964), and Ellis (1974) have stated that anxiety may have growth promoting effects and may lead students to greater levels of self-awareness. Fritz Perls (1969) believed anxiety was a form of life energy:

> the formula of anxiety is very simple: anxiety is the gap between the now and the then. If you are in the now you can't be anxious, because the excitement flows immediately into ongoing spontaneous activity. If you are in the now, you are creative, you are inventive. (p. 2)

Research from both laboratory (Sarason, 1961; Sarason, Kestenbaum & Smith, 1972; Sarason & Mandler, 1952) and nonlaboratory settings (Dunn, 1968; Paul & Eriksen, 1964; Smith, Ascough, Ettinger & Nelson, 1971; Gaudry & Bradshaw, 1970; Zweibelson, 1966) has demonstrated that when evaluative stress is reduced test anxious students do as well or better than less anxious students (Note 1).

But current perspectives on test anxiety suffer from narrowness. Test anxiety is considered to be an exclusively student-owned problem while the evaluation systems predominant in North American education are believed to be good (they're the best we have), necessary (we must use something), or neutral (tests are okay, it's the way they're used). Few persons seem concerned that educational institutions place more

emphasis on evaluation than they do on learning itself. Suggestions for "doing away with tests" or dramatically restructuring evaluation techniques, particularly towards greater student involvement, are met with such great resistance that one might believe evaluation was the very cornerstone upon which the university was built. This strong need to keep evaluation sacred makes sense when the word power is substituted for the word anxiety. At present, there are over 550,000 students enrolled in Canadian universities, but there are only 15,000 faculty members. Students have forty times the numbers, but have the least power. Authoritarian power makes students anxious, not tests. Evaluation methods are frequently used to exercise power and authority (Scott & Dornbusch, 1975). Keeping students anxious increases their governability. It separates student from student by encouraging competition for faculty imposed limitations on rewards. Deffenbacher (1976) points out that testing was created to meet an information gathering need, but seldom have I seen testing actually influence decision-making except as a way of depersonalizing the process. The fact that tests are not constructed by the persons taking them, the content is generally secret and the results are used to enhance the power of the decision-makers serves to support the use of tests to express power and not to just obtain information. Students are being exploited since the true motives of faculty members are seldom revealed by their testing/evaluation procedures.

While many of my remarks stem from personal perceptions of educational systems, I have had several opportunities to systematically explore student evaluation methods and I am greatly surprised that there is such a poverty in the literature on test anxiety concerning the relationship between the

anxiety experienced by students and the testing process the student encounters. I have found (Carr, 1976) that students become more creative, imaginative and knowledgeable when they have significant opportunities to participate in the process and creation of methods of evaluation. Sometimes I have actively encouraged discussions in classes about student perceptions of my power and their responses to it; and what usually results is a demystification and equality of relationship which generates mutual growth. I have, however, experienced tension during these discussions which has led me to believe that I may fear losing my power, power which other faculty members appear to believe I should always keep. I have often heard from other faculty that standards would be lowered if power were mutually shared. Possibly, anxiety about loss of power is contagious in a classroom.

It is important to note as Deffenbacher (1975) has demonstrated, that students who experience anxiety in evaluative situations are generally equal in ability to those who do not experience anxiety. But since their performance or demonstration of student ability will be restricted, it is essential that faculty work to develop methods which enhance performance. University and school counselors can facilitate these changes by providing information, workshops, consultation and research to faculty and administration. Counselors may need to perceive themselves as change agents or client advocates. Students have legitimate needs and counselors must make themselves available as sources of support. Counselors must be willing to work with the groups that make-up the surrounding network of the client (Jaffe, 1973). Deffenbacher (1976) states that testing is pervasive in our society, so providing students with coping skills will give them

practical training to deal with situations outside the university. However, wouldn't it be even more practical to assist them to deal with power and its authoritarian use in a democratic society?

In conclusion, university counselors need to perceive test anxiety as a reaction to an unequal distribution of power, an environmental distress call. The problem won't disappear, but the counselors' responsibility for action must broaden. Rather than working exclusively in a remedial framework by providing anxiety reduction treatments, the counselors can provide preventive and developmental services aimed at eliminating distressful environmental conditions. To do this, counselors will need to develop multiple roles, including a strong educative-research dissemination function. Higher education is particularly skilled in resisting changes based on research findings.

Counselors must pay attention to not only the psychological experiences of students but must also consider the socio-political context within which growth can occur. Counselors' efforts must coincide with those of students to engage in critical thinking and cooperative humanization. Evaluation will always be necessary in education but to paraphrase Mao Tse Tung, external conditions are only effective if they coincide with internal potentialities. Oppression in educational settings is not new and has been discussed by many writers, notably Illich (1971), Fanon (1968) and Friere (1970). What is important is that counselors may unwittingly be agents of the oppression rather than liberators. Test anxiety is a learned response and a widespread phenomenon in our society; let's find out who is teaching it and help them change their methods.

*If you don't know it now, you'll never know it.*

(Anonymous Student)

## Reference Notes

1. For a thorough review of test anxiety treatment methods see D'Estrube, S. The cognitive behavioral management of test anxiety. Unpublished master's thesis, University of Victoria, 1976. or C. D. Spielberger (Ed.) Anxiety: Current trends in theory and research. New York: Academic Press, 1972.

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